

## Silence, Rape and Politics in *Measure for Measure*: Close Readings in Theatre History

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When I started working in the field of performance studies, one of the books that had the most profound impact on my way of thinking about the relationship between text and performance, and about how to do a ‘close reading’ of specific moments in a performance, was Philip McGuire’s *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences* (1984). McGuire’s concern was with those moments in the playtexts when a character’s silence, whether simply because the character is supposed to be on stage but has no contribution to make to the dialogue or whether the character stays silent in response to a question or direct address that requires a reply, can be interpreted in various ways that subtly change the meaning of the play. In the chapter on *Measure for Measure* which I found particularly inspiring, McGuire explored the remarkable conjunction of the ‘final silences’ of six different characters, three of which I want to revisit here to explore their relationship to rape and, in their staging, modern politics. The first of these is the silence of Angelo who, from the moment the Duke commands him to marry Mariana, has not another word to say. The other two are those of Isabella in response to the Duke’s two proposals of marriage to her. All three fall into McGuire’s category of silences that might express the characters’ “mute, accepting wonder” or that could “testify to a resistance that wordlessly but effectively drives home that [these marriages]... result far more from the Duke’s exercise of his legal authority than from the imperatives of shared erotic love” (69). No close reading of the playtext on its own can help us interpret these textual silences: the object of our attention, therefore has to shift from the playtext to the performance-as-text,<sup>1</sup> ‘for in such business, / Action is eloquence’ (*Cor.* 3.2.76-7).

I want to use this article to demonstrate how one may want to go about reading such eloquent action. What has changed since McGuire’s days is our greater awareness of the link between textual criticism and performance studies and the need for a theoretically-informed, responsible and transparent critical practice. It is worth pointing out that I have only actually

been an audience member in one of the RSC productions of *Measure for Measure* I have researched for this article, and it is a production which I have chosen not to discuss because its treatment of Isabella's silence did not add anything to my argument. As will become clear, my close readings in recent theatre history are entirely based on the painstaking reconstruction of specific moments based on a great number of different, and sometimes contradictory, material traces of past performances, ranging from published accounts by theatre practitioners, reviews, production photographs, archival video recordings and promptbooks, all of which are held in the RSC archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

My work as a 'close reader' of these multiple textual traces is akin to that of a critical editor, who presents a new text, which (c)aims to reproduce in a mediated way the original text or texts, in a way that makes it/them accessible to a contemporary audience/readership. The original performance, like Shakespeare's manuscripts, is lost in time—all that remains are memorial reconstructions and a variety of textual traces that are trustworthy to a greater or lesser extent. The archival video recording of a performance, where it exists, is the closest we can come to the lost performance, but it has to be treated with caution, not only because the quality tends to be very poor, but also because in allowing the viewer to rewind, pause and review a scene which will always be identical it does something which the medium of theatre performance makes impossible.<sup>2</sup> Working with such materials involves a careful consideration of contradictions between different pieces of evidence (or 'variants'), cruxes that can be in themselves meaningful and a help to interpretation. Where I go beyond the remit of an editor is in the way that this new text is already openly presented as part of a critical argument: I do not 'edit' the entire performance, but, like a literary critic citing and analyzing specific lines, subjecting them to a close reading, I isolate and focus on the moments that support my arguments. I also rely on my readers' ability to sift through the evidence for themselves—hence my practice of referencing the documents on which my readings are based in footnotes that supplement the 'Works Cited' with references to archival

material and the implicit assumption that my readings are no more ‘definitive’ than any critical edition of Shakespeare’s texts can ever claim to be.

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The problematic nature of Isabella’s silences at the end of *Measure for Measure* is obvious from the comments made by Daniel Massey, the actor who played the Duke in Adrian Noble’s RSC production in 1983. Key to his interpretation of the role was his establishment of the Duke’s relationship with Isabella. In a discussion of his approach to the character, he stated:

We found moments, of course, scattered through the play, where we could build a growing awareness of each other. Isabella becomes so excited about the scheme of the bed trick with Mariana in Act 3 that she plants an impulsive kiss on the Duke’s cheek. There is more than a vestige of the adventure caper about the whole moated grange sequence ... and at 4.3.132 where he must, in the short term, steel himself to put her through an awful emotional struggle, he plants a kiss upon her forehead. This is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Lucio. They spring apart, and, in a long look across the stage at each other, ... much seemed to be accomplished. But the decision to bring them closer together was accounted for largely by the Duke’s proposal at the end. If it isn’t some prank, ... then the moment, important as it is, coming as it does at the climax of the play, simply has to be filled. The Duke ... has words with which to inform things. Isabella has nothing but her emotions. It is, in any event, an intriguing relationship, and Shakespeare, having greater theatrical wisdom than any other dramatist I’ve ever encountered, was probably right to leave the decision to us. (Noble 19-20)

In the absence of any stage directions, “the moment”, as Massey says, “simply has to be filled” one way or another. Isabella’s final silences pose a problem great enough to have forced this company to work their way backwards through the play to create enough of a psychologically consistent journey for the characters to turn Isabella’s puzzling silence into joyous acquiescence. Similarly, Sophie Thompson, who played Isabella in the Globe theatre

production of the play in 2004, found that “Getting towards the end [of the play] somehow makes you want to go back to the beginning again and take the journey through from start to finish. You have to go back over things at the beginning in order to find out where you are at the end” (Thompson n. pag.). The ending of the play is so incongruous for these modern actors that it requires a ‘preposterous’ approach to characterization, where the beginning of the play can only be interpreted by the actors if informed by its ending. In Adrian Noble’s 1983 RSC staging, accordingly, Juliet Stevenson as Isabella, once she had recovered from the shock of the Duke’s first proposal, enthusiastically accepted his second offer of marriage by stroking his head and kissing him at length.<sup>3</sup> No wonder Michael Coveney, in his typically conservative review for the *Financial Times*, concluded that this was “the most palatable production of the play” he had ever seen (Coveney, 1983).

However, Massey’s last sentence also registers his unease with the strategy used in the 1983 RSC production: he feels compelled to use the cliché of Shakespeare’s theatrical wisdom to excuse away the fact that the play has forced the company to come up with their own solution to the problem posed by the play’s ending. As Juliet Stevenson revealed in an interview, the director, Adrian Noble, could only conceive of this ending as a happy one: “Our director wanted it to end as a comedy—he meant comedy as defined by a resolved ending.” Tellingly, Stevenson seems to have been far more aware than the director of alternative possibilities, for she added: “But you know, there isn’t a fixed end to a play. The *script* ends. The words run out. But the *ending*—that’s something that has to be renegotiated every performance” (Rutter 52-51). Even if the action—stroking the Duke’s hair and kissing him—was the same every night and was intended by the director to signal a comic ending, Stevenson’s comment suggests that that same action could have been intended, ‘negotiated’ and read differently every performance.

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Stevenson’s reference to the ‘script ending’ is suggestive if we take into account Tiffany Stern’s research into early modern rehearsal practices. Stern brings to light two important factors that change our perception of how the early modern theatre worked:

1. There was no time for extensive rehearsals—there might have been enough to go through the most important exits and entrances and to figure out who would be standing where in particularly complex scenes, but no time to have a run-through of the play.
2. Actors did not have access to the whole play; all they had was a copy of their own part, with the relevant cue at the beginning of each speech. This means they probably were not aware of who was going to say what to whom before the first performance in front of an audience, when they would be hearing the rest of the play possibly for the first time.

For the actors playing Isabella and Angelo, the script did indeed end and the words run out. After that, these actors could only respond to implicit stage directions in the words of fellow actors—unlike their modern counterparts, they could not preposterously re-invent the beginning to make sense of the ending. Close reading of the playtext reveals that the only implicit stage directions for Isabella in the last part of the play are in the Duke's sentence "If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake / Give me your hand, and say you will be mine, / He is my brother too" (5.1.483-86). There are two directions here: Isabella is bidden to give the Duke her hand, which is something the actor can certainly do. But what the actor can't do is to follow the second direction, which is to say that Isabella will be the Duke's. The early modern boy actor, if the first performance was also the first time he played the part together with the rest of the cast, probably looked at a loss at this point, knowing he was expected to say something but also knowing that this wasn't written into his part. This explains the apologetic nature of the Duke's next half-line, "But fitter time for that" (5.1.483-86), which can be played to register the boy actor's visible discomfort and lets him off the hook for a while.

This scenario may look somewhat different if we take into account Scott McMillin's research on the relationship between boy actors and the adult actors to whom they were

apprenticed. McMillin finds that a high proportion of the cues in the female parts of boy actors were provided by the male characters played by their masters/acting teachers. This suggests that boys, unlike the rest of the company, may well have had additional rehearsal time together with their masters. Masters and their young apprentices probably went through their common scenes together and the master taught his apprentice all the necessary conventions and how to respond to his speeches. Within this scenario, there are two options for the final act of *Measure for Measure*. Either the master took the boy-actor through the entire play, right to the end of the last act, in which case he may have taken a no less ‘preposterous’ approach to the play than modern actors and have directed the boy actor to demonstrate acquiescence. Or the master, who in the performance environment outlined by Stern did not have much spare time on his hands at all, only took the boy-actor through his speaking part, which ends long before the Duke proposes to Isabella. A boy who had thus been trained thoroughly up to his last line but then had been left without any direction on how to (re)act may look even more bewildered, frustrated, or even angry at being left with two open cues than one who had not undergone the same degree of preparation.

Of course, as one of the peer reviewers of this article shrewdly suggested, the boy may have been taught a convention such as ‘Do what the high ranking figure commands unless something later in your own part makes this impossible.’ But we are losing ourselves in ever more imponderables at this point: it is time to return to a close reading of the text. There, it seems obvious to me that the situation is not sufficiently clearly resolved with the Duke’s first proposal and Isabella’s silent response, for the Duke comes back to it in his last speech. When he proposes to Isabella for a second time, just before inviting everybody to go to his palace with him, his words betray a loss of confidence in comparison with the first proposal: “Dear Isabel, / I have a motion much imports your good, / Whereto, *if* you’ll a willing ear incline, / What’s mine is yours, and what is yours is mine” (5.1.526-29, emphasis added). Here the Duke not only tries to win her over by telling her how good this would be for her, but he also acknowledges that it is all hypothetical and dependent on Isabella’s

goodwill. On the early modern stage, the ending is quite likely to have left the audience unsure of whether Isabella would marry the Duke or not.

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Isabella's and Angelo's uncomfortable silences, as Michael Boyd showed in 1998, can be turned into an almost cozy feel-good romance through a combination of stage business and readjustment of focus. Having decided to stage the last scene as an attempted military coup by Angelo, which was thwarted by a counter-coup by the well-prepared Duke, the emphasis was on the state rather than the individual. Angelo's abuse of power to gain sexual favors was openly linked both by Michael Boyd and by Stephen Boxer, the actor playing Angelo, to Bill Clinton's sexual misdemeanors that were providing headlines at the time of the production (Gilbey, "Villain" and "Measure"). It was also implicitly an echo of the not all-too-distant past at home, where John Major's government had been unsuccessfully trying to get rid of the sleaze in which it was steeped. Accordingly, the Duke's counter-coup was represented as the positive new beginning associated with the advent of New Labour, where orderly power had to be accompanied by a restoration of healthy sexual relationships. The Duke made sure of this by taking Angelo by the hand and leading him to Mariana, who put her head on her husband's shoulder as he embraced her.<sup>4</sup> A similarly optimistic spin was given to Isabella's silence. As Michael Billington noted, Clare Holman's Isabella moved "from a position of radiant moral certainty to awareness of her own sexuality" (Billington, "British") making her acceptance of the Duke's offer of marriage a matter of tying up loose ends that could be sealed with a kiss (even though Isabella's attitude seems to have remained somewhat ambivalent in the performance recorded on archival video).<sup>5</sup> If the national press, as Robert Smallwood shrewdly pointed out, was sharply divided in its opinion of the play, with "the left largely in favour, the right very hostile" (Smallwood 241), this reflected the New Labour politics of the production itself.

For once, however, I'm inclined to side not with the left but with the right in my response to this production. What Boyd seemed all too keen to gloss over is the way the open silences of Angelo and Isabella point to a view of marriage not as a happy comedic resolution

but rather as both a form of state control and a kind of rape. Isabella and Angelo, through their silence, suggest that marriage is something they have to be tricked or trapped into. In fact, as both Angelo and his comic foil Lucio assert, marriage is the equivalent of, or even something worse than, a death sentence (see also Maus 180-81). Lucio protests that “Marrying a punk ... is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging!” (5.1.514-15). Angelo, more seriously and disturbingly, declares: “I crave death more willingly than mercy”—a mercy which involves married life with Mariana—“Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it” (5.1.469-70). Insofar as these men are coerced into marriage rather than be allowed to die, as Angelo says he craves to do, they are put into a position we are familiar with from Shakespeare’s rape victims. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia, when she realizes that she is about to be raped, begs for “present death” in order to be kept from her rapists’ “worse than killing lust”. Lucrece, too, “hath lost a dearer thing than life” when she is raped by Tarquin (687).

In *Measure for Measure*, there is certainly a sense that the bed-trick through which Angelo is duped into having sex with the one woman in the world he least wants to sleep with is a kind of rape by Isabella through her substitute Mariana. ‘Measure for measure’ indeed: the rapist is punished by being raped; victim and aggressor swap places. The roles are reversible and bodies, as has often been noted, are oddly interchangeable: Mariana’s body can be substituted for Isabella’s, just as the role of victim can be substituted for that of the perpetrator.<sup>6</sup> The very iconography surrounding the assignation between Angelo and Isabella/Mariana is one of rape: the walled garden, as Amanda Piesse points out, is “a conventional symbol of virginity.” Here the virginity that will be ravished is not so much a woman’s as the man’s, since, “through the motif of a secret door unlocked with a key,” Isabella and Mariana take away Angelo’s “public as well as his private innocence” (Piesse 74). The silence Isabella enjoins Mariana to, reminding her to say little more than a “soft and low” “Remember now my brother” (4.1.66-67) here cuts both ways: by being silent, Mariana makes the swap of bodies more plausible and identifies herself as a rape victim, but the silence of the encounter also imposes the silence of the rape victim on Angelo. At the conclusion of the play, both Isabella and Angelo are simultaneously sexual aggressors and



victims of sexual violation, a paradoxical state of being that finds expression in their common wordlessness.

It is the sense that Lucio and Angelo had rather die than be married to (and, implicitly, have sex with) their spouses, and the consequent positioning of Angelo as a 'rape victim,' that throws up the odd equivalence between the play's frustrating ending and the central dilemma of the play, Angelo's attempted rape of Isabella. Isabella, too, states that she had rather die than have sex with Angelo or, it is implied, rather than have sex with anyone at all. Consequently, when the Duke uses his authority at the end of the play to persuade her to get married to him, the marriage which is likely to be imposed on Isabella is a sanitized equivalent to Angelo's proposed rape of her. In both instances, the man uses his position of power over Isabella to coerce her into having sexual relations with him. In both instances, the man masks his sexual coercion as a form of exchange of love for Claudio's pardon; a substitution of Isabella's maidenhead for her brother's head.<sup>7</sup> Angelo says Claudio shan't die "if you give me love" (2.4.145). The Duke's trade-off of Isabella's body and love for Claudio's life is implicit in the parallel syntax of his first proposal "If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake, Give me your hand...". Isabella seems to escape rape by the Duke's deputy only to be tricked into having sex with the Duke himself, so that Angelo's assault is revealed to be little more than his compliance with the Duke's initial instruction to be "at full ourself" (1.1.43) (Shell 92-93). Seen from this point of view, a happy ending of the way imagined by Michael Boyd and, to a lesser extent, Adrian Noble, seems rather contrived and quite naively conservative in its politics.

A far more potent approach, it seems to me, is that first attempted by John Barton in 1970. As Barton later said, his intention "was that Isabella's response should be open-ended" (qtd. in Nicholls 77), an open-endedness which was, at the time, deeply troubling to reviewers. While neither the promptbook nor the reviews of the production give much away about how Angelo's silence was played, what we can gather from these sources is that, having fainted at the sight of the unexpectedly live Claudio and hence been unable to reply to the Duke's first proposal, Estelle Kohler's Isabella simply did not respond to the Duke's second

proposal. She was “left alone, staring into the auditorium, a woman amazed, bewildered, and stricken” (Marriott),<sup>8</sup> an image unsettling enough for the end of a comedy to have provoked John Barber, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, to the following diatribe:

When at the end of the play [the Duke] graciously offers Isabella his hand in marriage, she disdains the magnificent offer. Although beautifully acted, the moment is misconceived. The Duke is not a pathetic old man. . . . At the end, Isabella must, of course, become his happy duchess and help him, with her cloistral purity, to regenerate the State.

Tellingly, the intended open-endedness of the romantic plot in Barton’s staging was interpreted by Barber as a closed ending and a political move: Isabella’s lack of response here became equivalent to a rejection of the Duke and, hence, an obstruction to the regeneration of the State. (I love the idea that rejection automatically turns the Duke into “a pathetic old man”).

Under Nicholas Hytner’s direction, at the height of Thatcherism, the conclusion of the play pointed even less ambiguously towards a recognition of the link between state repression and the challenge to sexual integrity. Isabella’s right to her body and her chastity, within a society coming to terms with the implications of AIDS for the sexual revolution, was never in doubt.<sup>9</sup> Even before the last scene, in which Josette Simon’s Isabella stared at the Duke in disbelief at the crassness of his first proposal and, for the second proposal, echoed Estelle Kohler in just looking at him and refusing to budge as the Duke recoiled from her before exiting with the rest of the company,<sup>10</sup> the production made sure that the Duke’s sexual advances should be seen as equivalent to Angelo’s. This was achieved through a particularly violent encounter between Angelo and Isabella in act 2, scene 4. Sean Baker’s Angelo seemed as pleased by Isabella’s refusal to yield to him as was the Duke, both men being seemingly attracted by her very display of chastity. The parallel went deeper, though. Excited by her rejection, Angelo flung Isabella down onto the floor of his office, sat on top of her writhing body and pulled off her veil. Isabella’s low moans (clearly audible on the archival video

recording) once he climbed off her were clearly the effect of deep trauma, but they also sounded disturbingly post-coital.<sup>11</sup> This scene was echoed almost exactly by the encounter between Isabella and the Duke during which he informed her of Claudio's supposed death. In her dismay, Isabella collapsed on the floor and moaned while the Duke climbed onto her in his attempt to comfort her.<sup>12</sup> There was little here in the body language and Isabella's moaning to distinguish between Angelo's open assault and the Duke's underhand manipulation. Isabella's shock at the Duke's proposals therefore came as no surprise. Her stiff stillness at the end was re-enforced by Angelo's equivalent silence: this Angelo pointedly kept a frosty distance from Mariana and showed no sign of relief at his reprieve.<sup>13</sup> If Michael Billington faulted Josette Simon's portrayal of Isabella for "never suggest[ing] that Isabella is shocked into an awareness of ... the sexuality she has carefully suppressed," that is because he seems to have missed the point that in this AIDS-era production, there was nothing wrong with the choice of chastity and that marriage, as feminists were pointing out, could be seen as a coercive institution. What Billington, along with most other critics, did understand, though, was that this production offered "a devastating [sic] portrait of a sick, hypocritical society, in which flourishing crime coexists with judicial harshness" (Billington, "Sick").

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I want to probe deeper into the odd equivalence, in the playtext, between the attempted rape of Isabella by Angelo and the 'rape', through the bed-trick, of Angelo by the combined forces of Mariana, Isabella and the Duke. What we have in the latter is a reversal of the generally accepted gender roles of male rapist–female rape victim; what is initially a crime by a man against a woman is turned into a crime perpetrated by a woman on a man. This reversal and gendering of sexual guilt, if not sexual aggression, as female, is in fact a feature that pervades the play. True enough, through the words of Pompey, it is made clear that restoring sexual order to Vienna would involve the 'splaying' of all the young men in the city—so, to the bawd, at least, it seems clear that the sexual license that prevails in Vienna is to be blamed on male promiscuity.

However, within the play, it is not men's sexuality that is represented as a problem but women's. Even though *Measure for Measure* revolves prominently around an attempted rape of a woman by a man, this rape is represented from the point of view of the perpetrator rather than the victim. Again, a comparison with *Titus Andronicus* is revealing. In the tragedy, the scene of the rape is clearly presented from the victim's point of view: Lavinia is given scope to plead, though in vain, before she is physically overpowered by the men who stop her mouth and drag her off-stage. Afterwards, too, the focus is on the victim rather than the rapists, who are given no opportunity to reveal any sentiments that might provoke sympathy. In Shakespeare's 'comic' take on attempted rape, by contrast, what should be a story of male aggression is, as Kathleen McLuskie has shown (88-108), turned into a story of female temptation of the passive, feminized male victim. You could say that Isabella herself is the person who initiates this reversal when she states:

I would to heaven I had your potency,  
 And you were Isabel! should it then be thus?  
 No; I would tell what 'twere to be a judge  
 And what a prisoner. (2.2.68-70)

Clearly, what she *intends* to say is that if she were a judge, she would show mercy on Angelo as the petitioner. But what her lines *also* suggest is that she wishes to arrogate Angelo's power and place him in the position of 'a prisoner' (which she isn't in this scene, so she's exaggerating the power divide between them). This sense of power and quasi-sexual aggression about her is what is implied in the asides with which Lucio eggs her on:

LUCIO.

... You are too cold. If you should need a pin,  
 You could not with more tame a tongue desire it:  
 To him, I say.

LUCIO.

You are too cold.

LUCIO.

[Aside.] Ay, touch him; there's the vein.

LUCIO.

O, to him, to him, wench: he will relent;

He's coming; I perceive 't.

LUCIO.

Thou'rt i' the right, girl; more o' that. (2.2.57-133)

Lucio's initial two references to Isabella's coldness are particularly suggestive if we remember that, within the early modern medical theory of humors, women were defined by their coldness and men by their heat. When Lucio is urging Isabella to be hotter, he is urging her to behave more like a man. Her success in becoming hotter and more passionate is registered in Lucio's subsequent comments, which reveal that he feels Angelo is on the verge of being 'touched' by Isabella, whether literally or figuratively isn't clear. The reversal whereby Isabella has become the 'male' assailant who touches a feminized Angelo is evident from Angelo's aside towards the end of the scene: "She speaks, and 'tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it" (2.2.146-47). Here, his use of the verb 'breeds' pictures him as both sexually aroused and impregnated by the speech of an Isabella who, in her emphatic "desire" for "access" to him, is portrayed as the penetrating agent of the passive Angelo (2.2.19, 2.4.19).<sup>14</sup>

The play's perverse reversal not only of gender roles, but also more importantly of the responsibility for the sexual assault is made particularly clear in Angelo's subsequent soliloquy, where he asks:

Is this her fault, or mine?

The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha'?

Even though he goes on to say

Not she: nor doth she tempt: but it is I

That, lying by the violet in the sun,

Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,

Corrupt with virtuous season

his argument which, at this point, has become a defense of her, turns around again:

Can it be

That modesty may more betray our sense

Than woman's lightness?

This is a no-win situation for the woman: if she is 'light', then she is a whore. If she is modest, then that is figured here as a betrayal of men's sense in the double meaning of reason and sensual desires. So even if—or especially if—the woman is modest, that is, chaste, she is a sexual temptress and thus corrupting, turning men's virtuous flesh into rotting carrion. Angelo seals his speech off with the sentence

Never could the strumpet

With all her double vigour, art and nature,

Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid

Subdues me quite. (2.2.167-90)

The doubleness of the whore here becomes the doubleness, the deceptiveness, of the virtuous maid who is sexually alluring and who becomes the sexual aggressor in the last clause: she is the one who 'subdues' Angelo. What we see here is the introduction of a sado-masochistic

fantasy in which Angelo sees himself dominated by the virtuous maid turned sexual temptress. It is this speech which prepares the audience to hear ‘double’ in Isabella’s words when she next encounters Angelo and to detect, in the famous ‘ruby’ speech with which Isabella most passionately *rejects* sexuality (2.4.98-104), undertones of sexual domination and masochistic subjection. Repeatedly, then, Isabella, however chaste she is, and partly *because* she is as chaste as she is, is portrayed as a sexual temptress if not aggressor and responsible for Angelo’s attempted rape of her.

How important the implication of Isabella’s complicity in the sexual aggression to which she is subjected is to the working of this scene is evident from the critical responses provoked by Paola Dionisotti’s Isabella in Barry Kyle’s 1978 RSC production. Michael Billington, who over three decades of reviewing the play seems to be absolutely wedded to the idea of a sexual awakening in Isabella, seemed simply pleased at the way the interactions between the Duke and Isabella suggested “a girl gradually waking up to her own femininity” so that the play’s ending on her acceptance of his proposal could be read as “her delight in being a woman at last”—as if nuns could not, by definition, be women (Billington, “Kyle”). Reviewers who were less fixated on the play’s ending and more interested in the middle scenes, on the other hand, were troubled by Dionisotti. Michael Coveney pronounced himself “totally confused” about her portrayal of the role (1978). Irving Wardle found fault with “the Angelo-Isabella scenes which, for once, fail[ed] to ignite.” The reason for this became clear in a particularly combative review in the *Warwick Advertiser*, which complained that “Isabella emerge[d] as so mousy, dowdy and unattractive a figure as to make it doubtful that anyone could desire her” (JAP.).

Because Dionisotti, a somewhat haggard-looking actor, wore a full nun’s habit with a forbidding wimple and her interpretation of the lines refused to play on their sexual undertones,<sup>15</sup> she could not easily be held responsible for Angelo’s arousal and the scene was seen to fall flat. A plain woman is not rapable, it seems. To anyone familiar with feminist literature on the treatment of rape cases in modern courts, the scenario of the judicial system seeking to excuse sexual assault by blaming the woman for her supposedly provocative

behavior is all too familiar. What Dionisotti's Isabella thus revealed is the extent to which the success of these scenes hinges the audience's identification with Angelo rather than Isabella, and hence on the sexual assertiveness implicit in the scripted scene's representation of the pleading novice.

It isn't just Isabella, however, who is blamed for initiating sex in *Measure for Measure*. It all starts with the relationship between Claudio and Juliet, which is the play's most unambiguous example of a mutual affection that finds its fulfillment in sexual union and pregnancy. Nevertheless, when the couple is punished for their premarital sex, the punishment and apportioning of blame is unequal. Claudio, who is to be executed for it, undoubtedly gets the worse deal. However, when the Duke, disguised as the friar, talks to the two lovers, he seems to apportion the greater part of blame to Juliet:

DUKE. Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry?

JULIET. I do, and bear the shame most patiently.

.....

DUKE. So then it seems your most offenceful act  
Was mutually committed.

JULIET. Mutually.

DUKE. Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.

JULIET. I do confess it, and repent it, father. (2.3.19-29)

As Janet Adelman has pointed out, the Duke quite shockingly first conflates the baby, who is the result of the couple's 'sin', with the 'sin' of sexual intercourse itself (88). In his eyes, Juliet's pregnancy somehow makes her the bearer both of the baby and of the couple's sin. This is made yet more explicit when he insists that the fact that their love was mutual makes Juliet guiltier than Claudio: in his view, if a couple engages in premarital sex, the woman is more responsible than the man. (Note also that, implicitly, had the premarital sex not been consensual—a rape—Juliet would still have been guilty of sin, just lesser sin than Claudio's).



Women in Shakespeare's Vienna seem to be blamed for sexual looseness whatever their marital status and situation. In a fascinating article, Mario DiGangi draws attention to the interrogation of Pompey the bawd and Master Froth his customer, which seems to be designed to drive home the point that even married women, like Master Elbow's pregnant wife, are always already guilty of sexual indiscretion.<sup>16</sup> Confusing as the interrogation scene is, it is clear that something highly improper and upsetting has happened to Mistress Elbow. The implication is that she has been sexually assaulted by Master Froth. Unsurprisingly, the courts of Vienna are shown to be impotent and unable to deal with the case, releasing Master Froth and Pompey. Typically, once more, what starts off as a condemnation of male-female sexual aggression is turned into dangerously uncontrollable female desire that is responsible for the sexual aggression: it is Mistress Elbow's pregnant craving for prunes that leads her into the whorehouse where Froth assaults her. Sex within marriage, which is presumably what led to her pregnancy, is also what makes her always already susceptible to being a whore. What starts out as a story in which Mistress Elbow is the victim of sexual aggression is turned into a story of Mistress Elbow the woman who craves to be in a brothel.

This representation of women as inherently responsible for sexual dissoluteness culminates in the final scene, which shows Isabella herself being made to buy into the ideology whereby sexual aggression by men is blamed on the female victims. As a justification for showing mercy to Angelo, she states: "I partly think / A due sincerity governed his deeds, / Till he did look on me" (5.1.438-41). This line has disgusted many readers of the play, including, famously, Samuel Johnson, who saw this as a sign of Isabella's reprehensible personal vanity: "I am afraid our Varlet Poet intended to inculcate, that women think ill of nothing that raises the credit of their beauty, and are ready, however virtuous, to pardon any act which they think incited by their own charms" (42). But what Dr Johnson did not seem to realize was that here Isabella is, in effect, carrying the logic of the play to the extreme. By the end of the play, male sexual aggression and female culpability for that aggression and responsibility for all sexual misdemeanors have been naturalized and accepted

by all parties. Men, like Claudio and Angelo, have “but as offended in a dream” (2.2.4), and in that dream world, their offence can be blamed on women.

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Does that make the play too unpalatable to stage? Or is there a way of making the central scenes, with the bizarre audience empathy for Angelo they are predicated on, ‘work’ without blaming the victim? How can Isabella’s line about Angelo’s sincerity and the influence of her looks be delivered in a context that nevertheless maintains a sense of critical distance from the play’s outrageous way of displacing the guilt for sexual misdemeanors onto women? While Steven Pimlott’s 1994 staging for the RSC did not please everyone, I would like to suggest to you that this is the staging, to my knowledge, which managed to come closest to achieve such a delicate balance. The staging may not be what Shakespeare ‘intended,’ but was a reading of the final scene’s problematic silences that spoke to the historical moment of the production and that is congruent with the play’s representation of rape, politics, and mercy. Once more, the performers’ approach to this staging was clearly ‘preposterous’ in that the ending informed the beginning, but it did nevertheless maintain some of the abruptness and irresolution which is implicit in the scripting of the actors’ individual parts for the final scene.

Perhaps surprisingly, to a large extent this balance was struck thanks to the genuine sympathy provoked by Alex Jennings’s Angelo. Rather than subvert the workings of the central scenes by refusing to let Isabella’s lines carry a sexual undertone, as Paola Dionisotti had done in Barry Kyle’s production, this staging, as the archival video recording and the reviews confirm, quite simply embraced the male-centeredness of the scene. It emphasized the genuinely devastating effects Angelo’s sudden, unprovoked passion for Isabella had on this self-righteous man who had believed himself to be so good. Their first encounter stressed their intellectual rather than physical engagement with each other as Isabella produced a Bible to point out a passage that supported her arguments only to find it countered by Angelo, who quickly flicked through the book to find another passage that supported his stance instead. As Paul Lapworth commented, Stella Gonet’s Isabella was played

as a young woman of mature intellectual choice, already baptized and confirmed in her own opinions instead of the vulnerably intense teenager sometimes portrayed. This reading also makes her attractions for Angelo impressively more powerful, offering less the corruption of virginal innocence and more a virtue of equal force to challenge his own. Both the Duke and Angelo become infatuated with her unassuming superiority (Lapworth).

Angelo's attraction to Isabella was thus not based on her physique but rather her mind, making his desperate, abject confession of love to her in their second encounter, where he "[fell] to his knees before Isabella moaning 'plainly conceive, I love you'" plausible, pathetic and pitiable (Stokes). Michael Billington described him as "a man of iron control and impeccable religiosity who views his own moral disintegration with something approaching panic" ("Confusion"). Isabella's disgust at his advances was possibly more potent still because this man really believed he could win her "love." Though an attractive, passionate woman, Stella Gonet's Isabella could at no point be faulted for inviting Angelo's attentions: as John Stokes noted, she "fore[went] erotic intuition and seem[ed] unaware of the resonance of her own language."<sup>17</sup>

The stage was thus set for the final act. Isabella, in apparent anticipation of the prejudice she was bound to encounter once she had declared herself to have yielded to Angelo, wore a severe, masculine trouser suit.<sup>18</sup> In spite of this, her acknowledgement of her supposed defilement at Angelo's hands was greeted by the assembled crowd of 60 male extras with the "raucous smutty male laughter" that revealed the extent to which, in this world, the cards were stacked against any woman claiming to have been raped (Holland 200). Through the overwhelming presence of the male extras, Pimlott's production exposed the play's bias and managed to achieve a critical distance from its oppressive ideology: Rex Gibson described the scene as a "savage indictment of male justice."

The archival video shows that when the disguise of the Duke, who had treated her especially harshly at the beginning of the trial, was thrown off, Isabella's shock was palpable. She was blatantly not satisfied with his explanation of why her brother had had to die and shrank from the Duke's touch as a result. Meanwhile, Angelo's self-loathing reached a climax. If he was visibly annoyed at Mariana's plea for his life and sounded sincere in his demand for death, that was because he could not contemplate living with his open shame. Isabella's insistence on the "due sincerity [that] governed his deeds / till he did look on [her]," in view of Angelo's genuine, if twisted, love for her, rang true in this context. It was entirely plausible that this Angelo should be reduced to helpless, remorseful sobbing on the floor in response to Isabella's plea on his behalf (see also Stokes). What this reading of the scene emphasized was the sheer cruelty of the Duke's manipulation of Isabella's emotions in this scene: she screamed in dismay when her and Mariana's joint plea for Angelo was denied and seemed yet more shocked when instants later Barnadine, a confessed murderer, was glibly acquitted. No wonder Isabella shook off the Duke's hand impatiently when he first proposed to her.<sup>19</sup>

When he reiterated his proposal, she moved towards him slowly and rewarded him with a vigorous slap in the face:<sup>20</sup> as Ann FitzGerald pointed out in her review, Gonet's Isabella looked "at this devious man of tricks and traps, as appalled at the offer as she was at Angelo's sudden assault." The production thus neatly stressed the equivalence between the Duke's and Angelo's desire for Isabella,<sup>21</sup> and even managed to make "Angelo [seem] much the kindlier prospect of the two men" (FitzGerald).<sup>22</sup> Certainly, the loud laughter with which the audience on the night of the archival recording greeted that well-deserved slap in the face spoke volumes about the sense of release it procured.

#### INSERT ILLUSTRATION

But the play did not end there. Having given vent to her anger and disgust, Gonet's Isabella reconsidered her stance and rewarded the stunned Duke with a kiss, provoking yet more audience laughter. Isabella then broke off the kiss, to yet more laughter, raised her hand to her head and appeared upset. The lights faded on the uncomfortable-looking Duke and

weeping Isabella looking at each other motionlessly, leaving the play radically unresolved. Isabella's silence, here, conveyed far more complex meanings than McGuire's suggested alternatives of "mute, accepting wonder" or "resistance" (69). The unexpected kiss and ensuing distress both promised a happy ending while withholding it, and Isabella's contradictory response not only "seem[ed] to say 'a curse on all your sex'" (FitzGerald), but it also suggested, in tune with the play's emphasis on mercy, that Isabella might be able to forgive even the Duke and offer the ultimate sacrifice of her virginity as a result of her deeper understanding of charity. This ending was even capable, through the silent exchange of glances between the Duke and Isabella, to allow for the possibility that the Duke might return the charity and let Isabella retreat to the convent. As Peter Holland remarked, "It could not have been a more disconcerting ending" (221). In my eyes, it could also not have been a more satisfactory one.

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Many thanks to the participants of the seminar on "Close Reading" at the International Shakespeare Conference (2008) for their constructive feedback on this paper, to Mark Burnett and Ramona Wray for making me think about early modern and present-day performance together, as well as to the peer reviewers for their thoughtful comments.

<sup>1</sup> See my introduction to *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Aebischer 4-23) for a detailed explanation for why I do not use Barbara Hodgdon's term 'performance text' for theatrical performances.

<sup>2</sup> I have, in the past, insisted on a distinction between the 'performance,' the ephemeral theatrical event, and the 'performance text' of the archival video recording. See Aebischer 17. With retrospect, the designation of an archival video as a 'performance text' seems unnecessarily fussy: if it's a video we're looking at, why not just say so. The point, however, remains that the recording must not be confused and conflated with the live performance.

<sup>3</sup> Archival video recording; Promptbook 'Stroke hair of Duke + kiss.'

<sup>4</sup> Archival video recording; Promptbook "(28) Dk leads A → M. SR," "(29) A embraces M."

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<sup>5</sup> The promptbook shows that the production ended on “What mine is yours and what is yours is mine,” cutting the last two lines of the play. The description of the action reads: “DUKE GOES TO KISS ISABELLA / ISABELLA TURNS TOWARDS DUKE AT DOOR / BOTH EXIT THRU DOUBLE DOORS.” The archival video recording shows the couple kissing. Isabella suddenly breaks away and seems mildly upset. The Duke looks at her before slowly walking out. He waits for her in the doorway and she joins him, taking his outstretched hand before they walk off upstage together.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Leggatt, Maus (171-4) and Shell (97-136).

<sup>7</sup> The pun is Leggatt’s (342).

<sup>8</sup> See also accounts of the production by Thomson (123-25), Nicholls (89) and Corbin (31).

<sup>9</sup> Hytner acknowledged the double context of Thatcherism and AIDS in his interview with Janet Watts.

<sup>10</sup> Archival video recording; the promptbook records no moves for Isabella except for a pause sign, followed by “I turns to face D.S.” – the last blocked moves in the promptbook. Roger Allam, who played the Duke, described the last scene as follows: “Marriage represents a happy ending in the comedy form, but in *Measure for Measure* the ending is deliberately ambiguous. Isabella says nothing to the Duke’s proposals. I stammered hesitantly on the first one, and Josette used to look at me in disbelief at the Duke’s crass timing. It got a wonderful laugh on ‘but fitter time for that’ but I was trying to show the Duke’s realization of the anguish and pain he has put Isabella through. ... [The second proposal contained] A last, final, big ‘if’. Josette gave me a long appraising stare, and still did not consent. The play stops rather than ends, leaving many possibilities in the air. ... People often used to ask me whether they married or not, annoyed at our denying them a happy ending, or suspicious at our being over-optimistic. We thought probably they did, but only after a very long conversation.” (38-40).

<sup>11</sup> The promptbook does not indicate a corresponding action but only marks: “A x to her, slaps her face – she kneels, he kneels.” Several reviews, however, mention the ‘rape’ scene visible on the archival video recording; see, in particular, Mayfield and Coveney (1987)–note that they seem to be reviewing different performances. The discrepancy between promptbook and recorded performance and reviews suggests a scene that was unstable and could be more or less violent on different nights, depending on how the actors chose to play it.

<sup>12</sup> Archival video recording.

<sup>13</sup> Archival video recording.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Karen Bamford's reminder that "Given the strong cultural association between chastity and silence, Isabella's 'prosperous art' – her rhetorical aggression as she warms to the conflict – would ... make her virtue problematic for Jacobean audiences as well as for the deputy" (131).

<sup>15</sup> This is confirmed by the archival video recording. Dionisotti's costuming and appearance are evident on production photographs.

<sup>16</sup> DiGangi's main contention is that "the relentless definition and manipulation of female sexuality in *Measure for Measure* is the graphic symptom of male anxiety about female agency" (590).

<sup>17</sup> See also the archival video recording.

<sup>18</sup> Production photographs.

<sup>19</sup> Archival video recording, production photograph.

<sup>20</sup> Archival video recording, production photograph, various reviews, especially Spencer.

<sup>21</sup> See Paul Lapworth's assertion, in response to this production, that the Duke's "marital offer mirrors Angelo's illegitimate 'offence,' which in turn mirrors Claudio's original 'offence.'"

<sup>22</sup> See also the similar comments by Richard and Lapworth.

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